

Mad River Review

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 6

2017

Cased

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Recommended Citation

Drew, C. (2017). Cased, *Mad River Review*, 3 (1).

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Chris Drew

Cased

They descended on Sts. Peter & Paul Catholic Church every Wednesday night with their dobbers, quilted purses, menthol cigarettes, and McDonald's drive-thru sacks. Their husbands, for the most part, stayed home and watched IU basketball if it was on, or maybe caught the evening news. A few men appeared at the bingo tables every week—local parishioners who felt duty-bound, husbands too henpecked to stay home, mama's boys who never got around to leaving home—but mostly this was where the women went. They washed and fed and mended all week, but Wednesday nights were theirs.

It reminded Meredith of bees packed in a hive, these old women with neon-colored ink dobbers in hand, hunched over newsprint bingo boards or the fancy new computers that reminded her of the Speak & Spell she'd kept in her classroom until she retired. She didn't enjoy bingo much, but she had started coming last year, mostly at Bill's urging. "You gotta get to know the local wildlife," he'd said. She still sat alone at the folding table closest to the fresh air of the exit. No one sat nearer to her than crowd size demanded, but tonight the hall was packed despite the winter chill.

"G-39," a pimply young man mumbled into the microphone. He stood on a raised platform trimmed in moth-eaten gold and burgundy fabric, the words echoing through an old portable speaker that puffed dust at particularly loud syllables. Meredith tapped her foot on the concrete floor. The old light-up board on the wall showed too many numbers, and she knew that soon one of them would get what she was looking for. A shout would break the tension of the room, and someone would pocket five hundred bucks. To her surprise, though, the silence remained and the kid went back to spinning the wire barrel. The ping pong balls ricocheted around as she checked her own numbers. She was cased in the bottom left corner, as close as she could get without winning. N-41 would send her home with some good news for a change.

Around the room, the locals chattered through a thick haze of smoke. Most of them were her age or older, overweight, and dressed in clothes the Goodwill might reject. The woman across the table wore a dark green sweatshirt drizzled with tartar sauce from her Filet-O-Fish. Occasionally, she smiled in the distantly social way Meredith had gotten used to, revealing a chocolatey gap where a front tooth should have been. On the table in front of her stood a regiment of bingo dobbers, a thermos of coffee, and a half-eaten bag of cheese puffs. Orange crumbs dotted the deep lines around her mouth. Meredith had begun dressing down for her bingo evenings but couldn't quite blend in with even the rattiest leftovers from her years teaching school.

"B-7," spinner boy called.

"Bingo!" came a shout from across the room. A fat woman with freckles and a flattop haircut waved her stubby hands in the air, and an attendant swooped in to read her numbers to the spinner.

"That's a confirmed bingo," he said. "Payout of five hundred dollars."

The stillness broke as folks hustled toward the main exit in droves. Meredith had learned it wasn't worth trying to be the first out, so she waited. While everyone else ran to their cars or

bought up the last of the pull-tabs to try and recoup their losses, she sat at the rickety table and folded her last bingo sheet neatly, trying to stay focused on the numbers as long as possible.

"Did you win anything tonight, honey?" asked a creaky voice from behind her right shoulder.

"No, Myrtle Jane. Not tonight." She smiled as the ancient woman came into view, and then turned back to place her sole dobber in her purse.

Myrtle Jane was the only person who regularly spoke to Meredith at bingo, but she spoke to pretty much anyone else, too, whether they listened or not. She was a sweetheart, but her constant questions wore on Meredith when it was her turn to field them. The old woman hobbled slowly around the end of the table and lowered herself into the chair earlier occupied by Mrs. XL Green Sweatshirt.

"That's too bad, dear."

"Oh, you know how it is. I mostly just come out to help the church." She didn't attend Mass anymore. Had only been once since leaving Arizona two years ago. She'd started going to the Baptist church with Bill when they'd moved, because it mattered more to him.

"Now, didn't I hear you were Catholic?" Myrtle Jane asked for the hundredth time, pronouncing it 'cayth-lick.'

"That's how I was raised," Meredith said, treating it as a new question.

"Well," Myrtle Jane said with obvious doubt, "I guess we're all free to try it our own way."

"I guess." Meredith smiled again.

Myrtle Jane's thin white hair shot up in crazy shocks, and her taped glasses betrayed trifocals. Angels with trumpets and a gold banner that read NOEL! adorned her sweatshirt, even though it was early February. Meredith wondered what it was about Indiana that made every woman over fifty wear sweatshirts nine months out of the year. She stuck to her blouses for the most part. Twenty-five years with eighth graders made it hard to get used to anything else.

"Well, you know, I only come out to the bingo to keep Ruthie company," Myrtle Jane said, gesturing toward her daughter, a short redhead munching on Doritos as she flirted with a volunteer half her age. "I can't even play anymore. My eyes water too much to see the numbers."

"You've mentioned that a few—"

"Even if I could play, I'd give the money away if I won. What do I need it for? Most of these people should stay home anyway. Out here spending money they don't have. Gambling in a church." Her eyes lost focus for a moment. "What is it that you Catholics call a church?"

"A church."

"Seems like I've heard other names for it." She raised herself with effort back to her feet. "Well, sugar, you be careful going home. Watch for deer." With that, she pattered off toward Ruthie.

Meredith stashed her dobber and headed toward the exit at the back of the room, where she could slip away from the crowd and down the side street to her car. Where she lived, there were no streets. Just a pitted highway with coal trucks rumbling by at all hours. Bill pretended not to notice them, but she knew he wasn't that deaf. More than once she'd seen him turn the volume up on the television as the trucks passed.

Tiny sleet pellets had peppered the cars in the parking lot, and even after two years she wasn't used to how mind-numbingly cold winters could be here. One more thing she hadn't adjusted to. A respite usually arrived in March and April, but then the thick humidity would ooze in, so different from the dry heat of home, and she'd swelter until September. Bill also ignored

the weather, or pretended to enjoy it, using words like “invigorating” instead of “sub-zero.” But he hadn’t been outside since before Christmas, staying wrapped in thick blankets on the hospital bed they rented from the nursing home. Meredith’s stomach surged and she almost longed for another conversation with Myrtle Jane. She didn’t really understand the Hoosiers, but she still enjoyed her moments away from what Bill called their “ancestral manor.”

Back home, she found Nancy Harris doing crossword puzzles on the couch while Bill slept. Nancy went to the Baptist church with them. She’d lost her own husband, Mike, to cancer a couple of years earlier, and was always willing to sit with Bill when Meredith needed a break. She was a small woman, but thick around the wrists, and more or less the only friend Meredith had within 1,500 miles.

“Win anything?” Nancy asked, looking up from her puzzle book. *Three’s Company* played on the TV.

“Of course not,” she replied. “Everything went to the computer girls again. Maybe I should break down and try one.”

“I wouldn’t,” Nancy said. “‘Don’t trust machines,’ Mike always said. He wouldn’t even use the ATM if he needed money. Cut up the card they sent us.” She rose and tucked her puzzle book into her purse, then cast a glance at Bill, fast asleep in the hospital bed that dominated the living room.

“How’d he do for you?” Meredith asked. Whitish-pink gums hung dry in his open mouth. She still couldn’t get used to seeing him without his teeth. His smile used to get him pretty much anything he wanted. It had helped bring them here.

“Didn’t eat as much as he should’ve, I guess. Kept saying he wanted chicken and dumplings.”

“I get that from him a lot. I’ll have to whip some up soon. Gets something in his head and it’s settled, that’s for sure.” She moved toward him and brushed some cracker crumbs off his pajamas.

“I could probably make some and drop them by, if you wanted,” Nancy said.

“No, Nancy, you’ve done plenty already.” Meredith wasn’t ready to lay down her duties yet. “Why don’t you get home before the weather turns again? They’re saying snow sometime tonight.” A lie, but she wanted some time alone and Nancy didn’t even drive in the rain.

“Oh, well, I’d better get going, then.” She moved to the door before turning back to Meredith. “If you need anything at all, you call me, all right? Doesn’t matter what time it is.”

Meredith watched headlights crawl across the far wall, then dropped onto the couch without taking her coat off. Bill snored softly. For the first couple of months, she had cried when she looked at him like this, but now it was just what he called “the norm.” Instead of weeping, she let it knot up inside. For two years, he’d been her rock, her guide in this land of farms and coal mines and potlucks, and now she was helping him slip away from her as peacefully as possible. She would be alone here soon.

She zipped her coat and went back outside, lighting a cigarette on the porch. She’d started again when Bill was diagnosed, having given it up in her forties. A dirty little secret, and something that Bill wouldn’t approve of, but it helped get her through the unbearably long, dark hours of the Indiana winter. She craved cigarettes at bingo, too, sitting in that haze for hours, but the ladies’ cold shoulders weren’t melting, so she refused to imitate them. She had really tried to

reach out in the beginning—bringing recipes to share, trying to learn the latest gossip. They weren't rude, but a barrier stood between them, wordlessly separating native from immigrant.

The frost-covered yard glowed in the weak moonlight as she sat in the rusty porch swing, Bill's favorite spot to survey the land where he'd been raised. It was a fluke they were even there. Bill had left home to fight in Korea when he was eighteen, then got sent to the southwest for electronics training after the war. He met Meredith shortly before his discharge and decided to put down roots. Happiness came easy, and they enjoyed the warm desert nights in their first porch swing, drinking glasses of iced tea that Bill sweetened beyond all reason. The students at DeMiguel Junior High had voted her teacher of the year twice, and Bill made a frame in his woodshop for each certificate. They never had kids of their own, though they had tried, and instead clung more tightly to each other. He took early retirement at fifty-five, and within six months got restless. They went on a couple of vacations in the west, ambling around Yosemite and Yellowstone, and then he brought her to Indiana for a week so he could catch up with some old friends, particularly Mike. She assumed the itch was scratched until the phone rang one night a month later. Mike had seen that Bill's old house was back on the market. They argued for weeks about it, but Bill and his smile were persuasive, and at the age of sixty, Meredith left home.

Now she stepped into the backyard. Thin, ashy clouds wisped around a bleak sliver of moon. Instead of the brilliant white she remembered from childhood, it had a yellow tint. The huge oak tree that shaded the yard in summer was dry and crackling, its gnarled branches twisting toward the night sky. Nothing broke the blinding silence as she smoked her Kool down to the filter.

As the chill began creeping through the seams of her coat, a bell rang through the thin wall of the house. After a last drag, she stuck the butt under a decorative rock and went back inside. Bill was sitting up, clutching a small chime that Meredith had bought at a yard sale. Pain etched his face.

"I wondered if anybody was left around here," he said, forcing a toothless smile as he dropped the bell on his topmost quilt. "Nancy get taken off okay?"

"About twenty minutes ago." She sat on the edge of his bed and ran her hand over his head. She'd loved to straighten his tousled hair, but it had been burned away by the chemo.

"How are you feeling?"

"Like a million bucks."

"Any pain tonight?"

"Some, I guess." The "s" sounds whistled without his teeth.

"Nancy said you didn't eat much."

"Look on the bright side. At least I won't throw up much."

"The doctors want you eating to keep your strength up." She hated badgering him. "She said you thought chicken and dumplings sounded pretty good."

"It does when I'm hungry." His eyes narrowed and he took in a quick hitch of air. "Right now I'm not. How was bingo?"

"Good," she said, knowing it made him happy.

"Did those old cows give you a hard time?" he asked.

"I gave as good as I got."

One of the first times he'd convinced her to go, she'd made the mistake of calling bingo on the last game of the night without having the right numbers. By the time it was sorted out,

half of the women had left, and those remaining were whispering conspiratorially. She'd made a joke of it to Bill, and he laughed at the telling, but she still remembered how alone she'd felt.

"Are you sure you don't want something to eat?" she asked.

"It wouldn't stay down. My belly's doing flips."

"I know, sweetie." His head felt hot to the touch. "You're awfully warm."

"Feed a cold, starve a fever," he said with another toothless flash.

The bell woke her around one in the morning, and she found Bill with his covers thrown to the ground and his knobby frame writhing in sweat. At first, she thought he'd rung the bell to wake her, but then saw he was still in a fitful sleep. He'd kicked his blankets to the floor and the bell had followed them, probably bouncing off the end table. She looked at him, exhausted and half-naked as he whispered in his sleep. She caught her name, along with Mike's and some she didn't recognize. Probably from the Army, or his childhood in this house.

Their home in Flagstaff had been so different, with its soft grass and open rooms where sunlight touched every corner. The walls around her now were covered with cheap brown paneling that probably hadn't seen the light of day since it came off the truck. Even in the summer, the room felt hollow, cave-like. When she asked why he loved this place so much, he just smiled and said "I grew up here."

As she began to tuck the frayed blankets around him, his eyes shot open and he took a quick breath, like the seal breaking on a can of peanuts. His looked around the room for a few moments as if he didn't recognize his surroundings.

"Are you okay?" she asked, fear cutting through her drowsiness.

He looked back at her and his eyes slipped into focus. "It hurts."

"I know." She put her hand to his head. Warmer than before. "You're so hot. I'll be right back."

She went to the kitchen and returned with a damp dishcloth wrapped around a few ice cubes. When she dabbed his forehead, he flinched at the cold and then let his head sink into the sweaty pillow. She spent so much time soothing pains caused by the chemicals they kept shooting into him. "It's for the best," a young doctor had said when she questioned the side effects. She'd imagined what it might be like to douse him with his own radiation.

The ice began to melt, and rivulets ran through the deep, loose creases of Bill's face, over the top of his head, and into the hollows of his ears. The bed was soaked, but he seemed calmer than before, so she let it wash over his face and neck, through the dark recesses of his joints. She undid two buttons on his crumpled pajama shirt and began wiping the sweat from his chest, being careful around the port-a-cath below his left shoulder. She couldn't get used to something so mechanical jutting from her husband. His ribs stood out like bars on a jail cell, and he didn't move while she caressed him. Eventually the ice melted away and all the cold seeped out of the wadded cloth. When she sat it on the cluttered end table, he opened his eyes.

"That hit the spot."

"I'm glad. Feel like eating anything yet?"

"Maybe in a bit. Could you just sit here for now?" He took her hand. "I was having bad dreams, and when I woke up, I thought I was back in Flagstaff. Nothing looked right until I saw you."

"Well, I'm not going anywhere."

When he slept, she went to the kitchen and took a chicken from the freezer. As she began to run it under warm tap water, she breathed in a thousand different meals, thick and oily. They had soaked into the walls, the countertop, even the floor tiles, filling the room with everything from beef roast to cobbler. She'd learned to cook those dishes for him years ago—starchy, fried foods—and developed a taste for them herself. Now, as she cracked the wing joints with her butcher knife, she wondered if such meals had a hand in his cancer.

The first Wednesday in March, Meredith pulled into the parking lot of Sts. Peter & Paul, sitting for a while before getting out of the car, or even turning off the ignition. Across the street was a row of unattractive houses with big trucks and motorcycles parked out front. The lawns were more or less kempt, but nothing like the manicured Flagstaff suburbs. The grass here was abrasive under bare feet, full of cockleburrs and acorns even in the springtime. Why couldn't she get over this? It's not like they'd moved to the moon, or had left family behind in Arizona. As the blue-hairs began drifting into the hall, she put her head against the steering wheel and closed her eyes, trying to imagine herself home, but the peaty smell of Indiana was unmistakable. When she looked up, Myrtle Jane and Ruthie were crossing in front of the car. Myrtle Jane waved like a five-year-old.

Inside the hall, everything seemed louder than usual. The weather had broken, so even the timid souls had come out, filling the cinder block room almost to capacity. Meredith took her normal isolated seat, but by the time bingo started, she was boxed in on all sides. The last seats to fill up were directly across the table. Ruthie and Myrtle Jane.

"Hello," she said.

"Hi," Ruthie replied, then tended to her board.

"How are you today, dear?" Myrtle Jane asked with a denture-perfect smile. Meredith thought of Bill's unused dentures sitting in a Mason jar next to his bed.

"Fine, Myrtle Jane. How about you?" Meredith prepared herself for a litany of ailments and nosy neighbors.

"You don't look fine. You look like somebody's been dancing on your grave."

Nobody here was direct until Meredith didn't want them to be.

"No, I suppose I don't look fine. I haven't slept for more than three hours at a time all week, and my washing machine is full of rags soaked with my husband's vomit. I guess that'll take the fine out of a person." Some of the ladies around her glanced over and then quickly away. Ruthie shook her head with a disapproving flick of her eyes. Everyone except Myrtle Jane looked offended. "I'm sorry. That was probably more than any of you wanted to know."

The heads went back to hovering over bingo boards, but Myrtle Jane leaned over with her smile still in place.

"You get used to it," she said. "When my Earl was sick, I thought I'd go crazy in that house, and I probably did for a while, but the Good Lord helped me through it all right. He'll do the same for you, too, dear."

She was trying to be helpful, even nice, but the words implied kinship, and though Meredith had been starved for intimacy, she had come to realize that she didn't like the thought of bonding with these women who had learned to exist without their men, who went home to cans of condensed soup and government cheese. Getting sucked into that, even if it meant support, felt repulsive. She wanted Bill to help to keep her sane here. How could he leave her

alone with Myrtle Jane while their house in Flagstaff held the young family they'd sold to, full of tiny feet on the living room carpet?

"Meredith, are you all right, dear?" Myrtle Jane had apparently been waiting for some time.

"I suppose so."

Bingo began directly, and all of the players hunkered down over their boards, dobbers in hand. Myrtle Jane, with her bad eyes, rose and wandered about the room, pestering whoever she happened to light on. Meredith was happy to see her go, but had trouble focusing on the game. The partition that divided her mind from Bill at the bingo hall felt rickety. He hadn't been in pain when she left him with Nancy, but he was quieter than usual. She tried to stay, but Bill would have none of it.

"You need to get out and see your friends," he'd said. "What are Myrtle Jane and Ruthie going to think if you don't show up?" She couldn't tell him that Ruthie wouldn't even notice and Myrtle Jane would just bother someone else. She'd created a phantom life in his mind, filled with imaginary friends and confidants. He rested better that way. Looking around the room, she knew it could never happen. They were too different, too distrustful. They were kind, but only to each other. Or was it her? Had she grown too proud of her differences? Did it matter, if her mind was too cluttered with Bill's pain to care?

As the evening moved along, Meredith thought of him enduring *Three's Company* with Nancy and began to get restless. Ruthie's Pepsi-fueled belches distracted her further, and she began missing the called numbers. Even the meeker players began to annoy her. Mrs. XL Green Sweatshirt picked her nose at the other end of the table.

Meredith tried to focus on her board. The next game was speed bingo. The spinner would call the numbers as fast as he could, and the first person to cover every square on a board won. It often cured her of her thoughts, requiring her undivided attention. A hush fell over the room, and the drink machine was unplugged. No one was supposed to speak, though this wasn't enforced on Myrtle Jane as a rule. Most people just ignored her until it was over.

The room grew still, dobbers in every hand hovering over the newsprint boards. No computers allowed. The click and rattle of the ball cage sped up. With the TV off, everyone waited to hear the numbers. It reminded Meredith of Bill when he went fishing. He would get a nibble and every muscle in his body would tense, waiting for the strike. No slapping at bugs, no whispering.

"B-3, B-14, O-72—" The spinner took off at a breakneck pace and the sticky sound of dobbers filled the room.

"G-46, O-68, I-17—"

Meredith's world was on three five-by-five numbered squares. The one on the left had every number so far. Eighteen to go.

"B-7, N-39—"

She rolled the dobber onto the numbers in a fluid motion. N-39 hadn't been there for her, but it was still a good start. She only needed two more Bs to fill that column.

"B-12, I-29—"

She hadn't seen a better speed board in months. Only two numbers missed so far. The prize was \$200, enough money to fill the gas tank for several more trips to the doctors in Evansville and maybe even stop at Red Lobster if Bill was up to it.

"G-49, G-58—"

"How are you doing there?" Myrtle Jane whispered as she slid back into the seat across from Meredith.

"I-27, B-1—"

She had her Bs.

"Looks like you're off to a pretty good start," Myrtle Jane said in a church whisper.

"Shhh," Meredith hissed without looking up from her board.

"I-31, B-3—"

No more Bs, she thought. How about some Os?

"Thelma Hays over there didn't get a single number on the first five calls." More church whisper. How could she not see that Meredith was occupied? Why didn't her daughter shut her up long enough to finish the game?

N-42, O-75—"

The pace seemed to double.

"What do you need now? Os?"

"Don't worry about it," Meredith sputtered between dobs.

"Did you get O-75?"

"Yes."

"No reason to get snippy."

"I'm not getting—"

"B-13, I-30, G-47—"

Had she missed a number? She didn't think so.

"I'm only trying to help," Myrtle Jane said.

"That's sweet, but could you please—" How could everyone else in the room be ignoring her so completely?

"G-57, G-60—"

"I don't think you dobbed fifty-seven."

"No, I didn't, because you won't shut up." She didn't have time to consider her words. Myrtle Jane made an offended snort, and turned to her daughter, who was dobbing madly. The numbers were coming faster, and Meredith knew she had lost a couple to Myrtle Jane. She bore down again, trying to remember what she'd heard while she dobbed the new ones.

"I think you owe me an apology," Myrtle Jane said, without a whisper this time. A couple of ladies glanced her way, but kept marking their boards.

"N-33—"

"I don't think I do," Meredith said without raising her eyes. She was cased on the left side. O-73 would do it for her.

"Well, I would have thought that someone like you would be glad for some help," Myrtle Jane said.

"Mom, hush," came the late admonition from Ruthie, whose eyes stayed glued to her board of pink dobs.

"B-11—"

For a moment, Meredith let it pass, but *someone like you* popped to the front of her mind, blocking even the numbers. It made her feel ashamed. "What's that supposed to mean?" she asked.

"Nothing," Myrtle Jane said. "Just dob your numbers."

"I-27—"

“No, tell me, Myrtle Jane, why would I be glad for some help?” Her jaw tightened as she moved her dobber away from the board. Myrtle Jane sank back into her folding chair, slapping her hand onto the flab of Ruthie’s arm. Ruthie shot a quick glare.

“Bingo!” came the cry from the other end of the table. Meredith hadn’t even heard the last numbers. The business of proving the win was over in a few seconds, and as an attendant made the payout, Myrtle Jane leaned over, peering at Meredith’s board.

“Hmmm.” Myrtle Jane’s eyes swelled through the lenses of her glasses like a giant squid’s. “Sweetheart, why didn’t you dob O-73? You would’ve won.”

Meredith looked at the wall unit that displayed all the numbers in play. It was there, and she had missed it.

“You poor thing,” Myrtle Jane cooed.

The room grew suddenly too small for Meredith, too full of smoke and sweat. She stared at the numbers on her board, her vision dimming until it was all she saw. Without looking away, she reached out for her dobber. She could feel the purple ink between her fingers, oily and cold. Myrtle Jane spoke, but Meredith ignored her. She didn’t want to hear what any of them had to say anymore. Deliberately, she rolled the foam tip over O-73, feeling its stickiness on the paper, and then dropped the dobber into the wastebasket beside her. As her tunnel-vision subsided, she saw that Ruthie and the other ladies at the table had begun staring.

“Mom, maybe you’d better shut up and leave her alone,” Ruthie said.

Meredith said nothing. Instead, she tore the winning board from the booklet and stood up, smoothing her blouse with her free hand. She looked up at the young bingo spinner, preparing the next game, and then back at Myrtle Jane.

“Are you all right, dear?” Myrtle Jane asked, her eyes somehow huger through their Coke-bottle lenses.

Meredith wadded the bingo board into a tight ball and threw it as hard as she could into Myrtle Jane’s gaping face. It lodged between the old woman’s glasses and her temple as Meredith turned to leave.

The air was cool enough outside that her breath puffed in front of her. The dusk-to-dawn light on the front of the church cast a rusty glow on the parking lot. Her heart raced as it did when Bill’s bell rang in the middle of the night. Where had she parked? She walked between cars, keeping an eye out for their little Ford. In the distance, a car stereo bleated electric guitar into the night, mixing with the sparse traffic on Main Street and the buzz of the dusk-to-dawn light. The sounds swirled in her head, and she sat down on a worn bench in the churchyard. The music grew louder as the driver moved through a nearby alley.

“Where’d you go?” a voice boomed from the doors of the church. “Are you still out here?” Meredith leaned forward and saw Ruthie approaching from her right. Her first instinct was to run for her car. She could see it now, parked under a telephone pole at the far end of the lot, but Ruthie was too close.

“I’m here,” she said.

Ruthie tromped up the bench, her considerable chest bouncing with each step. Her breath jetted in steamy bursts, like a bull in a cartoon.

“Who do you think you are?” she asked, planting herself between Meredith and the Ford. Anger tightened around her eyes and mouth, mingled with something that might be embarrassment. Meredith had hit her soft spot—a mother with nothing better to do than follow her daughter out at night.

“Nobody,” Meredith said. “I’m sorry.”

“Well, Nobody, my mom may be a pest, but you don’t have any business doing what you did in there.”

Several women peeked out through the glass doors of the church. She had finally gotten their attention.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Meredith said. “I’ve looked foolish enough for one night, I think.”

“And what about my mom? Does she look foolish enough yet?” Ruthie’s cheeks were blotchy red. “What’s wrong with you?”

Meredith considered the question. Considered explaining herself, down to the last puke-rag and pain pill. “You wouldn’t understand,” she said, and then stood up and walked past Ruthie, hoping she wouldn’t try to physically stop her. It didn’t matter, though. They’d beaten her.

“You’re full of shit, lady,” Ruthie called after her in a quieter voice. “I understand you just fine. You’re not the only person who’s got somebody to take care of.”

Meredith turned, trying to muster a last burst of dignity. “Do you even know my name?”

Ruthie stared, blinking her false eyelashes.

“That’s what I thought.” Meredith started walking again, wanting only to end to this final spectacle. They couldn’t understand her, and she knew now that she didn’t want them to. She didn’t want to have anything in common with them. Bill was enough. She got in the car and started the engine, feeling Ruthie’s eyes on her as she pulled out of the parking lot. How many more watched her through the windows of the church? They would talk about this for weeks.